

Unmasking Urban Traces

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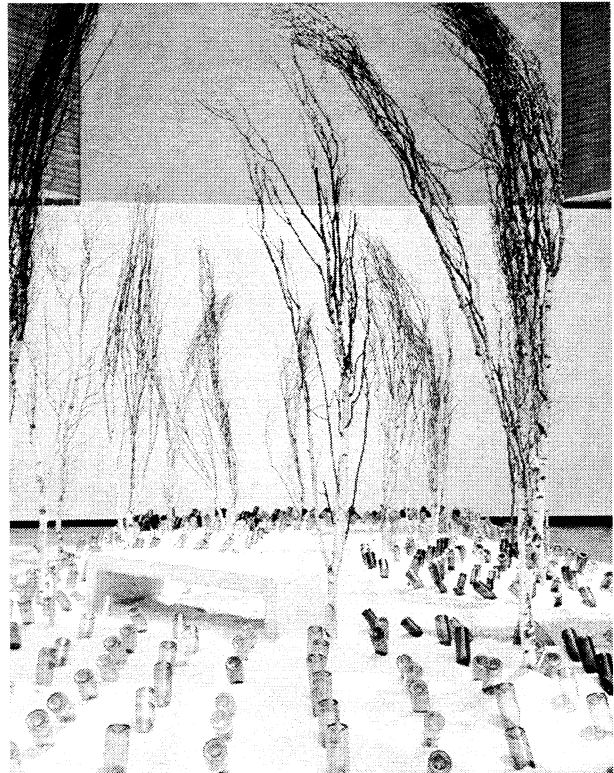
Yale University

Unmasking Urban Traces

The title of this panel “Unmasking Urban Traces” refers to a mode of operation on the city where everyday signs of life, culture, and tradition are unmasked in meaningful ways. The urban environment is largely being designed through incremental patterns of use and adaptation. “Unmasking” or exposing is a kind of urban archaeology where latent mysteries of the city are unearthed.

Urban traces can be tracked at many different scales. Large-scale patterns can be found in communities of immigration who adapt built fabric to their everyday needs such as Latino East Los Angeles. Cultural groups often bring their own spatial divisions and everyday rituals to existing environments-- sometimes these patterns layered over the existing create new cultural forms of expression. The city as a palimpsest is one which is written and re-written many times, with each new layer augmenting, adapting, or erasing from its previous histories. Marginalized aspects of our history can be unmasked and reconstituted. Unmasking the traces of history of a building or site can also reveal contested terrain with regard to ownership and the public realm. Uncovering signs of repression or struggle for territory in the city is another means by which to consider traces.

“Unmasking Urban Traces” describes a genre of work on the built environment from different fields and perspectives which attempts to pay close attention to cultural traces which are informing the vitality of our cities. The strategies of this work range from exposing latent histories in order to empower marginalized groups, to strengthening the democratic use of public space within the city, to political activism expressed in built form. This vision of the city makes a connection between the world of design and the world of the vernacular. The act of unmasking traces is a way of revealing our common history and our common bonds to the landscape which we commonly inhabit.



Memory Garden Phase II, *California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles, CA 1990; Mildred Howard.*

Memory Narrative and Identity

“Prophetic thought and action is preservative in that it tries to keep alive certain elements of a tradition bequeathed to us from the past and revolutionary in that it attempts to project a vision and inspire a praxis which fundamentally transforms the prevailing status quo in light of the best of the tradition and the flawed yet significant achievement of the present order.” Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press Inc., 1988) p. XI.

The use of memory, place, history, family, and identity are used to stimulate creativity. Using objects to co-mingle past and present, a model of the world is created; to stir emotions, to question beliefs and misconceptions about how different people view their environment. Everyday objects are used beyond their original purposes to express connection to and respect for ancestors personally and collectively.

The circumscribing of space can be seen as evoking a centrality of location. The work is inspired by the spatial presence and feeling of congregation--a group, a choir, or an idea about issues of race, gender, culture and religion. Often the anticipation of these groups is not present in the real world but (exists) as a memory of the past or an anticipation of the future.

—Mildred Howard

Unmasking Latino Urbanism

Every place and people have history. Sometime these histories are shared, but many times they are not as in the case of East Los Angeles which makes understanding a place and its people more complex. The history of the built environment of East Los Angeles is American and the history of the residents is Mexican.

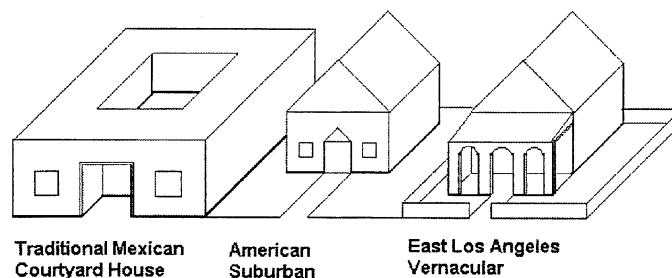
East Los Angeles was not built by Mexicans but by many ethnic groups that came before them. Mexican have retrofitted the existing landscape to fit their needs, thus creating a new hybrid. To fully understand and appreciate this urban hybrid one must examine the two histories: one of place and one of people.

There are many different disciplines which unmask the physical environments and social characteristics of people. The sociologist examines peoples' behavior. The urban planner analyzes data and numbers. The anthropologist examines artifacts. While all are excellent methods of comprehending place, a more comprehensive approach is needed in order to truly understand the complex nature of East Los Angeles. This approach advocates drawing upon techniques from several disciplines in order to read patterns evolving within urban communities.

Patterns can be deciphered amongst the traces within this community. Ritualistic activities are brought to this place and superimposed onto the existing architecture. Activities such as hanging out, talking to a neighbor, and decorating your house add dimension and meaning to our public realm. Adaptation of the existing urban fabric creates vernacular hybrid forms. The city is being designed incrementally by cultural groups expressing their identities—becoming sensitive to these traces perhaps can yield a more realistic approach to urbanism.

—James Rojas

EVOLUTION OF EAST LOS ANGELES VERNACULAR



Traditional Mexican
Courtyard House

American
Suburban

East Los Angeles
Vernacular

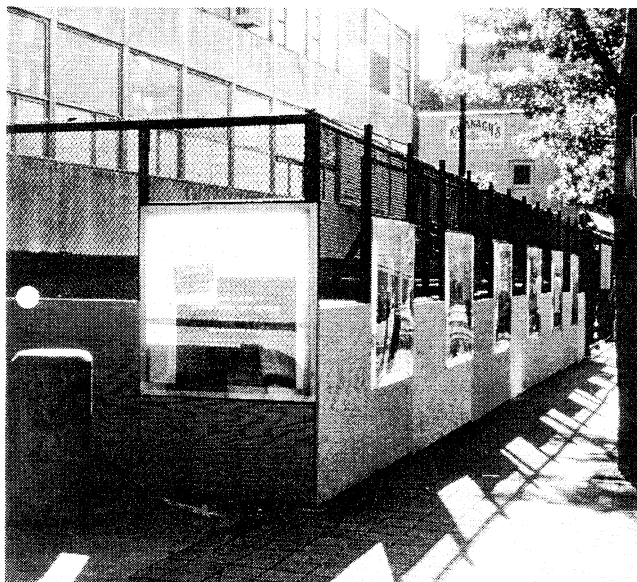
The Progress Wall at 1156 Chapel Street

The Progress Wall at 1156 Chapel Street is a temporary public space project that reveals the forgotten traces of history of an urban landmark, its near death as a vacant property, and questions its future impact on a diverse section of the city. The Progress Wall speculates upon the real meaning of progress by serving as an interactive surface, a record and collector of individual responses to the specific site or the city in general. As a public space, this project investigates the possibility of creating an interim site that informs and empowers its everyday users, regardless of race, class, occupational, or political position, in influencing the direction urban development.

From 1954 to 1986, 1156 Chapel Street was the site of a vital Jewish Community Center (JCC) designed by Louis I. Kahn in consultation to Abramovitz & Weinstein, a local architectural firm. The JCC's closing mirrored the demise of New Haven's downtown and heightened its division from Yale University, which today is the city's largest employer and landowner. For over 12 years the vacant JCC structure stood symbolic of a brief but lively post-war period of multi-ethnic co-mingling and urban prosperity. In reality, however, this architectural carcass represented the failure of New Haven as a model city of federally funded urban renewal 40

years ago that created radical changes in the urban landscape by exclusive decision making and without sensitivity to the existing urban landscape. In contrast to the bare chain link fences and bulldozers more typical to periods of redevelopment, the Progress Wall is an example of how an interim urban space project can excavate meaning, sensitize future development to what already exists, and provide an open venue for participation in the public realm.

—Dean Sakamoto



The Progress Wall at 1156 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut; Dean Sakamoto

Visible and Invisible Histories

ASK YOUR WIFE TO TAKE YOU AROUND THE GIN MILLS AND THE BARBER SHOPS AND THE JUKE JOINTS AND THE CHURCHES, BROTHER. YES, AND THE BEAUTY PARLORS ON SATURDAYS WHEN THEY'RE FRYING HAIR. A WHOLE UNRECORDED HISTORY IS SPOKEN THEN, BROTHER.

-Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Writing in 1947, Ralph Ellison described the peculiar cultural condition of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century of being simultaneously visible and invisible within the larger framework of American culture. He evoked a cultural landscape occupied by African Americans, composed of vernacular spaces like juke joints, barber shops, and beauty parlors which though largely obscured and nearly invisible, held the ability to narrate the cultural histories of African Americans in the twentieth century. At the end of the twentieth century these and other urban landscape still offers a particular insight into the lives and cultures of black Americans. Since the publication of the *Invisible Man*, African-American vernacular and cultural landscapes have become the focus of scholarly and creative research. Historians, artists, and designers utilize the narrative power of these often invisible urban landscapes in Charleston, Atlanta, and Selma to construct placed-based public histories interpreting a more complex view of black life and culture in America.

Central to the 1965 Voting Rights Movement, Selma, Alabama and related sites in Lowndes, Dallas and Hale counties now form the basis of the newly designated National Voting Rights Trail. Mandated by an act of Congress the Trail will run from Selma to Montgomery and is intended to celebrate the Voting rights March and Movement. Yet now more than thirty years after the Voting Rights struggle the question of African-American cultural visibility remains a critical issue as the Trail interprets the events of 1965.

This presentation will explore a series of site specific design projects employed to make legible and interpret some of the contested and invisible spaces relevant to Voting Rights Movement. The projects presented explore both building and landscape design strategies which build upon traces found in the landscape Traces such as housing patterns, street grids, "graining" of the urban fabric represent the impact of race on the built environment and offer the opportunity to interpret and represent the multiple histories of a site. Collectively the design interventions are intended to serve as a means to establish a critical reading of a southern city unique to twentieth century American history.

-Craig Barton

BIOGRAPHIES

Craig Barton is an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, and is the editor of *Sites of Memory: Landscapes of Race and Ideology*, to be published by Princeton Architectural Press in Fall of 2000. He is principal at RBGC Associates, an architecture and urban design practice in Charlottesville, VA. The firm's clients include the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama.

Jeanine Centuori is an associate professor of architecture at Woodbury University where she teaches architectural design and theory. Her practice, UrbanRock Design is engaged in public space designs and memorials, mostly through community outreach building projects Her research and writing are critical examinations of the nature and meaning of public spaces, monuments, and memorials. Her work, both design and writing, has been published in "Landscape Journal," "Assemblage," "Art Papers," and the "New York Times." Her work has also been exhibited internationally.

Mildred Howard is a prolific artist whose work includes interior installation and urban environments. She has been recognized nationally and internationally through a wide range of solo and group exhibitions, reviews, and publications. She is included in H.W. Jansons History of Art, Fifth Edition and represented by galleries in San Francisco, Boston and Santa FE. Currently, she is involved in developing art for Yerba Buena connector a project in San Francisco along with artist James Turrell in connections with Millennium Partners/WDG I Ventures, Inc. & the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency .She has just completed a major installation for the new San Francisco International Airport using over 100 saxophones. She is the Executive Director of The Edible School Yard in Berkeley, CA., Consulting Professor of the San Francisco Art Institute and is has been working with the Exploratorium

James Rojas holds a Master of City Planning and a Master of Science of Architecture Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Science. His research is one of the few studies on U.S. Latino built environment and has been highly cited. Excerpts have been widely printed in publications like "Places" and the Los Angeles Times. Recently, he was featured on Warren Olney's radio program "Which Way, L.A.?" For the past 8 years James has lectured at universities, colleges, conferences, high schools, and community meetings on his research. His goal is to teach Latinos how to understand their environment. Mr. Rojas is a project manager for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Dean Sakamoto is on the faculty at the School of Architecture at Yale University and is the principal of his architectural practice, Dean Sakamoto Architect, in New Haven, CT. In 1995, Mr. Sakamoto received an artist's project grant from Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) and New Langton Arts to found Interim Sites, an art and architecture initiative that seeks to expand the concept of public space to underutilized urban sites. Mr. Sakamoto holds a B.Arch. from the University of Oregon, an M.Arch. from Cranbrook Academy of Art, and an M.E.D. from Yale University.